

212hh- How to be Happy

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(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

The first thing you have to answer is what happiness is for you? Most people generally go through life without even knowing what they want, just following things that make them feel good, and avoiding things that don't make them feel good. That doesn't necessarily mean that they're following happiness. It just means that they are following an impulse. So the first step in finding happiness would be to recognize the difference between just going after things that might make you feel pleasant at the time, and cultivating things that will lead to a long-term sense of well-being.

I'm sure many people are aware of that difference. If you stop and think about it, "What is it that makes me happy?", you will not necessarily know but you would know that things that you've been chasing up to that point have not resulted in contentment, which is really what happiness is. It's not found in being pleased with a current experience that you're enjoying, like being with your friends or having an outdoor adventure, etc. It's found in being perpetually contented with yourself, with your well-being no matter what life throws at you.

To achieve that, a certain kind of work is required, one of self-reflection and not one of just energetically going after every sensual desire that arises. By recognizing, through self-reflection, in which direction happiness lies, you then have a better chance of finding it. By clarifying for yourself what you want, what you need, and by reflecting on your past experiences to see which one of those made you happy in a sense that you were happy with yourself, content, and at ease, that will give you a clearer picture as to what is useful for long term contentment. Having such a clear picture is a necessary prerequisite, and then what you will come to realize is that the most common notion, the impulse-based notion of just chasing whatever the present sense-desire is, it's more often than not, not the reason for happiness, but instead results in you wanting even more, in you being unsatisfied, unhappy, not contented, and becoming more desperately driven, which is not a state of ease.

In other words, chasing sense pleasures, although that might provide you with a momentary distraction from your dis-ease, you can realize, if you do just a tiny bit of self-reflection, that those activities are not where happiness is to be found, and that they only provide a temporary satisfaction of your senses.

Most people who do not understand what happiness is would naturally think, "Getting what I want is happiness." But how about not wanting anything that you can or cannot get? If you don't desire anything, you can't grieve over not getting what you want either. So you can realize that happiness is a state of mind that you are responsible for. You might not be responsible for things that you get, things that you don't get, things that you had or lost, and so on. But you're certainly responsible for the values that you place upon those things.

Do you place value in the objects of your senses? Or do you place value on the contentment of the mind? If you place value in being perpetually content, then it requires you to develop the ability to say no to yourself, to draw a line for yourself, because otherwise, the sense desires will take you into infinite directions that can never be satisfied.

One needs to understand what happiness is. If you understand what happiness is, even if you don't make any excessive direct effort towards it, you will already be going towards it because you have a certain clarity of

what it is. Through understanding it, you would already have a clearer picture as to where to draw the line for your sense desires, when to say no, and so on.

For example, say that you want something, there's already the implicit knowledge, whether that thing is necessary, or whether it will just be another attempt to try and satisfy this insatiable thirst for sensual gratification, and you know when it would probably be better if you were to say no to yourself, it's not a hard thing to see, because that knowledge is already implicit. The problem is just habitually acting out of impulse.

Knowing what happiness is, is already a step forward toward contentment. Knowing when to restrain yourself, and then taking responsibility for when you do allow yourself to engage with your senses. That will make the mind more in your control. Which brings us to the second point, knowing what happiness is, is the prerequisite, it sets the direction for you to develop a happy mind. The development of happiness is the development of a mind that has been tamed.

The tamer and more control you have over your mind, the more at ease you are with whatever circumstances life throws at you. Things will be less challenging, so to speak, which doesn't mean everything will go your way, but means that when things don't go your way, when you don't get what you want, you will not lose perspective, because you haven't been blindly or habitually acting out of impulse towards every whimsical desire that arises. Knowing what happiness is, and developing certain self-control regarding your mind and your mental state, will not occur as a result of some magical recipe. Self-control arises on account of the effort that you put into withstanding the pressure of your sense's desires, learning how to draw a line, learning how to say no, then enduring it and growing out of it. Happiness comes from taming your mind, from freeing it of defilement.
